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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Seeing Mexico Through the Lens of One of Its Great Cinematographers

• by [Jeremy Polacek](#) on June 26, 2015



Installation view, 'Under the Mexican Sky: Gabriel Figueroa—Art and Film' at El Museo del Barrio (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

When it comes to the celebrity of film crews, fame is not fickle; it dotes lovingly on the director. Venerated tales circulate among the adoring of movies willed into existence (or tragically never finished) by directors mortgaging their homes, battling studios, or binding their lives to filmmaking, conjoined twins to their artistry. Who makes films? Directors. Or so the auteur theory goes. Some composers and screenwriters get notice and esteem, but that list is comparatively short.

This is one problem of El Museo del Barrio's [Under the Mexican Sky: Gabriel Figueroa—Art and Film](#), and also its huge, potential payoff. Figueroa was not Mexico's best director of its cinematic golden age; he was its greatest cinematographer — which is sort of like saying he was one of the country's greatest lesser-heralded artists. The show would seem to have its work cut out for it, then, needing not only to introduce a figure and demonstrate his artistry, but also to explain what he did and why it's important.



Gabriel Figueroa, film still from 'La Perla (1945) (© Filmic Division, Photographic Collections Fundación Televisa)

Fortunately, *Under the Mexican Sky* is assured and almost self-apparently significant. The exhibition knows — and from the very beginning shows — that

Figueroa had a knack for images: faces swim in light or sink in shadows, skies glow with clouds and glory in deep expanses (his airy atmospheres were so distinctive that they became known as “Figueroa skies”). What did Figueroa do? He made outstanding images.



Gabriel Figueroa, film still from 'Macario' (1960) (© Filmic Division, Photographic Collections Fundación Televisa) (click to enlarge)

Smartly, the first gallery is a multichannel screening room of his best work; from there the show is straightforwardly chronological. And it leans on the images, moving with an easy confidence and pace — impressive given that it covers a career spanning 50 years and including more than 200 films and collaborations with such filmmakers as Mexican greats Emilio Fernández and Roberto Gavaldón and such big movie names as John Ford and Luis Buñuel. In the midst of Mexico’s broad attempts at rebirth and discovery following its decade-long revolution, Figueroa sought to broadcast a new national language, much like Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros were doing in murals (Rivera even called him the “fourth muralist”). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that he was in demand both in Mexico and abroad; artists from Edward Weston and Paul Strand to Russian director Sergei Eisenstein took an interest in Mexico and found friendship there. As the exhibition explains, Figueroa was influenced by these outsider’s visions of his country, but he also reacted against them. (Later in life, Figueroa turned down an offer to join the production of *Rambo: First Blood Part 2*, then being filmed in Mexico. He deemed it “a nauseating piece of film.”)

Interestingly, Figueroa's original interests were drawing and music, but as money from his family's trust dwindled, Gabriel and his brother, orphans from early childhood, were forced to find work. For Figueroa, this was photography. The show tracks Figueroa's rise from portraitist (where his schooling in light and texture would serve him well later in life) to film still photographer to novice, but obviously skilled, cinematographer. In fact, in many cases his stills — images taken during production and used for promotional purposes — were striking, arguably even better, than the visuals of the film.

For a time he even apprenticed in Brooklyn, not all too far from El Museo's East Harlem location. During another stay in the States, Figueroa studied in Hollywood under the great cinematographer Gregg Toland, later immortalized for his work on [Citizen Kane](#). It's tempting to think of Figueroa as a Toland protege, especially since Samuel Goldwyn offered Figueroa a Hollywood contract following Toland's death in the 1948. The Mexican cinematographer certainly learned something of the American's mastery of textured shadows and plunging perspective. But Hollywood was not to be; the House Un-American Activities Committee was not fond of Figueroa, for starters.



Gabriel Figueroa, film still from 'Río escondido' (1947) (© Filmic Division, Photographic Collections Fundación Televisa)

In Mexico, the “fourth muralist” quickly made a name for himself, climbing up the filmmaking ladder. Like Rivera and others, he responded to the emergent national character, subjects the show shorthands in vitrine displays as “revolution,” “requiem,” “eden,” and “metropolis.” Figueroa drew no shortage of influence from the other three muralists, or from previous romanticized visions of the Mexican landscape by foreigners like Weston as well as national figures like Dr. Atl, in the form of farmers, gangsters, the sea, and agave trees. These artists were, Figueroa later said, “teachers in their way of perceiving human beings and objects.” Much of the middle section of the exhibition is devoted to reviewing these influences — an Orozco work is identified as having been appropriated for a scene in *Wildflower* (1943). But this was not a question of appropriation; curator Alfonso Morales makes it clear Figueroa was both an influencer and influencee in this shared, vital period.



Alfredo Rubalcava, still from the film 'The Big Cube' (1968) (© Filmic Division, Photographic Collections Fundación Televisa) (click to enlarge)

That period had sputtered out by the '60s, but Figueroa moved creatively ahead, working behind the scene on films in color, go-go boots and LSD replacing *campesinos* and machetes. It's also at this point that the exhibition runs out, devoting only one room to summarizing the remainder of Figueroa's

career, the long twilight kept unfittingly light. Few, if any, careers can maintain output and excellence over multiple decades. This bit of honesty might have better served the show, which by scale and square footage says what it does not deign to say in words: the later period is not as important or interesting as the one that preceded it. Such a softball coda almost overweights Figueroa's golden days. And in this way, Figueroa seems very much the cinematographer, easily unseen and ignored — a workhorse visionary, the director's helpmate. Nonetheless, out of the past and out of the archive, Figueroa is rightly and vibrantly recalled by [Under the Mexican Sky](#). It's a delight to see what he saw.



Gabriel Figueroa (© Filmic Division, Photographic Collections Fundación Televisa)
[Under the Mexican Sky: Gabriel Figueroa—Art and Film](#) continues at El Museo del Barrio (1230 Fifth Avenue, East Harlem, Manhattan) through June 27, 2015